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November 2013 | Volume 71 | Number 3
Tackling Informational Text Pages 10-15

You Want Me to Read What?!

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Common Core also shifts away from classic literature and allows for the reading of informational texts And what are informational texts? Those are handbooks from the EPA on how to make sure that your siding and your insulation is good in your house. Who in their right mind wants to read the government handbooks?

—Glenn Beck (2013)

Who, indeed?

Surprisingly, the Common Core State Standards avoided becoming the piñata of the kinds of petty controversies that have been customary in past discussions of curriculum reform in English language arts. During the entire standards writing and adoption process, there were no "reading wars," no grandstanding governors emptily threatening to forego federal education support, no marching ministers or protesting pressure groups. All in all, it was a pretty civilized affair.

We're now in the implementation season, and things have heated up a bit, but the main arguments against the standards are more about issues like federalism, test policy, President Obama's education preferences, data mining, and so on (Strauss, 2013). Such complaints do not say much about whether these standards are any good.

For example, former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch (2013) voiced a complaint that's pretty typical of the current reproaches:

I have come to the conclusion that the Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process with which they have been foisted upon the nation Maybe the standards will be great. Maybe they will be a disaster. Maybe they will improve achievement. Maybe they will widen the achievement gaps between haves and have-nots.

In other words, Ravitch avoids making claims about the value of the standards themselves but decries the standards

adoption process instead.

But there has been one kind of criticism leveled against the new mandates—and it targets informational text. The new standards have asked for big increases in rigor and the level of instruction in reading, added prominence to a literary canon, proposed a shift from an emphasis on personal writing to one on academic writing, expanded literacy teaching into the disciplines of history and science, promoted deeper analysis of the ideas and arguments in texts, and placed a new emphasis on inquiry and 21st century research tools (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State Schools Officers [CCSSO], 2010). Despite all those momentous changes, the major grumbles have been aimed at the fact that the standards encourage more reading of informational text at school.

In fairness, this will be an important change, and it's one that education leaders will have to think hard about if they're going to get it right. Here's my take on some of the key questions.

What is informational text?

That's a good question and not one likely to generate much agreement. According to some treatments, informational text appears to be no more than a synonym for nonfiction (Brown & Schulten, 2012); in others, it describes only a portion of the nonfiction universe (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). According to the Common Core standards, literary nonfiction is a subpart of informational text (NGA & CCSSO, 2010); in other schemes, such as that used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), literary nonfiction isn't in the informational text basket at all (National Assessment Governing Board, 2010).

Probably the closest the standards come to defining informational text is within the writing standards, but that description, although helpful, differs in key ways from the concept presented in the reading standards. The writing standards define *informational/explanatory writing* as text that conveys information accurately "to increase readers' knowledge of a subject, to help readers better understand a procedure or process, or to provide readers with an enhanced comprehension of a concept" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 23). This definition goes on to explain that such writing addresses types and components; size, function, or behavior; how things work; and why things happen. In other words, the standards distinguish informational writing on the basis of its purposes and functions.

Unfortunately, in the reading standards, such texts are tossed into the informational text stewpot along with seemingly variant narrative and argumentative texts—a savory dish to be sure, yet quite different from the cuisine served up in the writing kitchen, where these ingredients are kept emphatically separated.

The testing consortia's takes on the concept retain some of this muddle. For example, in its discussion of reading complex texts for grade 7, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) (2012) says that

informational texts/literary nonfiction include the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays; speeches; opinion pieces; essays about art or literature; biographies; memoirs; journalism; and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience.

Similarly, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (2012) says that for grades 3–5, the category includes

biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts; technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps; and digital sources on a range of topics.

And for grades 6–12, it includes

the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience. (p. 8)

The problem is that these testing specifications conflate so many functions and text types that they confuse, and perhaps undermine, the whole point of distinguishing literary from informational texts in the first place. The idea is to ensure that students gain sufficient experience in dealing with the varied characteristics and demands of a wide range of texts. By including biographies or other "true stories" within the informational text category, narratives—both fact and fiction—can continue to dominate classroom instruction, narrowing the range of texts served up rather than ensuring a real expansion.

Obviously, there's nothing wrong with having students read true stories, but if they take the place of more explanatory or argumentative texts, then it vitiates the value of distinguishing between literary and informational text. Susan Pimentel, one of the chief authors of the standards, wrote,

I think David [Coleman] and I have to take the blame for biographies and autobiographies and memoirs getting into the informational pile. To atone, we've been pushing hard on students reading informational text with informational text structures so as to counter the proclivity to just pick up another narrative that just happens to be true. (personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Ultimately, it doesn't really matter whether a biography is in the literary text pile (because it's a narrative) or in the informational one (because it's factual). What matters is that kids get a varied diet of text. School leaders have to push hard to ensure that classrooms go beyond fulfilling these categories nominally—that teachers select texts in a way that provides students with a sufficiently wide swath of reading experience.

Why are the standards making such a big deal out of informational text?

Studies have shown that elementary schools have done little to expose students to such texts (Duke, 2000) and that literary texts have dominated U.S. textbooks for a long time (Moss, 2008; Moss & Newton, 2002; Venezky, 1982; Watkins, 2011). That means that U.S. students read a lot of stories in their elementary classrooms, but not much science or history.

The concern is that such an unvaried reading diet can't possibly prepare students for the kinds of reading expected in college and the workplace. Devoting 80 percent of reading instruction to literature may improve students' performance in their English classes, but what about social studies, science, and math?

Does this imbalance affect students' reading achievement?

Maybe. According to the most recent international comparisons (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012), U.S. students don't read informational text as well as they read literary text. According to that study, there are nations where students read both kinds of text equally well and those where informational text performance is relatively higher.

In general, though, U.S. students did less well with informational text. Because the two kinds of text weren't scaled to be equally difficult, however, perhaps the informational texts used on the tests were relatively harder. Unfortunately, neither the NAEP nor the other international studies make such comparisons, so we can't say for sure that our students read one kind of text better than another.

Does research show that adding more informational text will improve student achievement?

No, not directly. No one has done a study to examine the learning results when students read different proportions of different kinds of text. The idea that students should get more experience reading informational text is based on the following commonsense notions:

- Because people read more informational texts in college and the workplace, it's important to become proficient with these texts.
- Strong evidence shows the differences between informational and literary texts as well as in the cognitive processes we use to read such texts (Otto, 1982; Weaver & Kintsch, 1991), so it follows that reading literary texts will not necessarily improve one's ability to handle informational texts.
- Students have much less experience reading informational text, which means less opportunity to learn how to read such texts well.
- People usually get better at what they practice, so if students had more chances to read informational text, they might improve their abilities in this area.

What should we expect students to learn from reading informational text?

Several years ago, I was talking to my wife and her aunt. I shared some arcane fact, and Auntie exclaimed, "He's smart!" My wife's immediate response? "No, he just reads a lot." And that's not a small thing.

E. D. Hirsch Jr. (2007) has long championed the importance of cultural knowledge, and research shows that comprehension is influenced by what we know (Kintsch, 1998). The most obvious outcome we can hope for is that students will end up knowing more about their social and natural world from reading informational texts—and that could have a positive effect on their reading comprehension.

In addition, informational text is usually organized differently from literary text. Informational text is more likely to use problem–solution, cause–effect, and compare–contrast rhetorical structures. And because of the way the standards categorize texts, argument would fall within its purview as well.

Text features differ, too. (When was the last time you saw bullet points in a poem?) Bold print, italics, headings and subheadings, and sidebars are all more common in informational text. Text guides such as tables of contents and indexes, for example, differ in important ways, as do illustrations and graphics and the roles they play. Of course, we read such texts for different purposes, and that makes us vary our reading approaches. Through reading and analyzing informational texts (and receiving explicit instruction), students should develop effective responses to all of these structures, features, and purposes.

But why can't English teachers teach "classical literature" anymore?

The Common Core standards proposed proportions of reading time that should be devoted to literary and informational texts in elementary and secondary schools: In elementary school, half the time should be spent on informational text; this should expand to 70 percent by middle school.

Many critics have misinterpreted this as a requirement that high school English teachers spend no more than 30 percent of their class time on poetry, short stories, novels, and plays. However, as the standards explicitly state,

The percentages ... reflect the sum of student reading, not just reading in ELA [English language arts] settings. Teachers of senior English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts. Rather, 70 percent of student reading across the grade should be informational. (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 5)

Do the math. Under the new standards, English teachers will still be spending the lion's share of their time on literature, but that means that history, science, and math teachers need to have students reading appropriate texts in their classes, too.

Should English teachers be spending any time on informational text?

Yes. In a forthcoming national survey (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, in press), which took place early on in the standards implementation process, high school English teachers claimed that 40 percent of students' current classroom reading already involved literary nonfiction and informational text.

English teachers are great guides to teaching informational text because they bring special tools to the table—they know how to analyze and interpret rhetoric and language. They have insights about reading that are valuable for dealing with essays, speeches, journalistic writing, and other literary nonfiction. So, along with lots of attention to stories and poems, some English class time is well spent on informational texts.

Does this mean that we'll be teaching fiberglass installation manuals and the minutes of National Reserve Board meetings?

I've pored over the lists of exemplary texts suggested by the standards, and I've not been able to find either of those entries. You might want to take a look yourself. Maybe these were considered, but they just didn't make the final cut.

What the Common Core standards have recommended are texts like Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"; the U.S. Constitution; the Declaration of Independence; Winston Churchill's "Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat" speech; Ronald Reagan's speech to the students of Moscow University; and a plethora of texts on science and technology, including ones on space probes, elementary particles, architecture, and engineering. I'll keep my eyes peeled for the fiberglass installation manual, however.

My kindergarten teachers say that informational text is developmentally inappropriate for young children. Is that true?

This canard is definitely making the rounds. Some critics point out that informational text doesn't really reflect young children's developmental stages or interests.

I can't find any developmental psychologist willing to support such cautions, and the only person I could find willing to go on the record with an opinion on the subject was my nephew Dominic, age 7, who admittedly isn't an expert on these matters. Nevertheless, he assures me that his early enthusiasm for the news magazine *Time for Kids* hasn't held him back in his scholarly pursuits so far, a pattern of interest that he apparently shares with many of his age mates (Donovan, Smolkin, & Lomax, 2000). In fact, many of the authorities who recommend informational text are doing so, at least in part, in response to children's interests in such materials.

A Balanced Diet

Arguments against the wide use of informational text with students lack an evidentiary foundation and ignore the reading demands that students will face in college and the workplace. The argument for informational texts is not that students should read more information and less literature but that they surely should read more of both (Jago, 2013). Righting the current imbalance will simply require increases in the reading of information.

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